

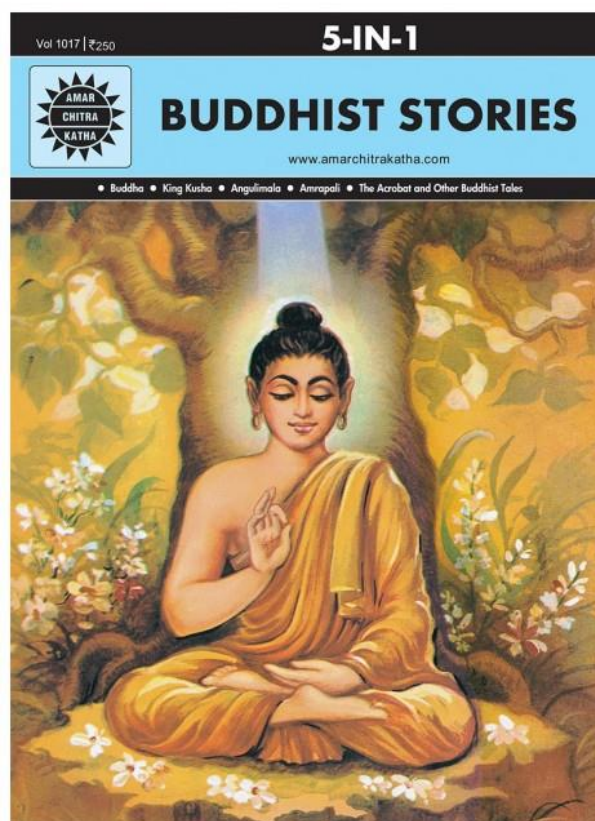
Famous Classic Indian Books: Buddhism and Empire

A series of reflections and notes around the relationship between Buddhism and the political category of the Empire.

The most superficial survey on Buddhist political ideas through history will immediately reveal that the favourite political system of Buddhism is the Empire (let's forget, here, about what other religions, Indian and non-Indian, maintain).

The all-time favourite political leader in Buddhism is the *cakravartin*, "world emperor". Emperor Asoka, for instance, is generally considered Buddhist because Buddhists have wanted him to be so, but there is no proof that Asoka was a Buddhist emperor at all. In any case, in Theravāda Buddhist countries it is given for granted that Asoka is the model of a ruler-patron.

Now, a superficial survey of the most dominant political ideas in the Buddhist world today (2014), East and West, will reveal that the favourite political system for the followers of this religion is democracy (and I would say that, if possible, liberal democracy). Tibetan Buddhist leaders are asking for democracy, Burmese Buddhist leaders are asking for democracy, etc.



Perhaps there is no contradiction in this, because democracy represents the political ideology of the actual empire of our times: the USA (and NATO partners). It is generally assumed that democracy is the best political system, at least in theory (but of course, in theory all systems are the best...). It is frequently assumed, also, that a “free” country has to be a democratic country.

Present day political leaders of confessed Buddhist background make efforts to justify why democracy is the most suitable political system in Buddhism, even though the Buddha was, in theory, apolitical or beyond-the-political, and even though historically the idea of democracy is absent in Buddhist literature of all schools. But still, some claim that we have to consider the spirit, and not in the letter, of Buddhist literature, and thus we will discover democracy at the very heart of Buddhist political thought.

One of these leaders cum theoreticians is the Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, a.k.a. “The Lady”. Thanks to Suu Kyi, the Pali Tipiṭaka has made an unexpected appearance in the contemporary international political arena. According to Suu Kyi, we have a proof, in the *Aggaññasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, that, according to Buddhism, Democracy is the best and the only legitimate system. She is referring, of course, to the legend of the *Mahāsammata*, “the great elected”—a legend that is found in that sutta. In her well-known book *Freedom from Fear* (1991) Suu Kyi wrote:

This [i.e. Buddhist primeval monarchy of the Great Elected] has been criticized as antithetical to the idea of the modern state because it promotes a personalized form of monarchy lacking the continuity inherent in the western abstraction of the king as possessed of both a body politic and a body natural. However, because the Mahasammata was chosen by popular consent and required to govern in accordance with just laws, the concept of government elective and sub lege is not alien to traditional Burmese thought.

In other words, because the primeval king was elected with the favour of the people, even though he was a king, the political system was democratic. This may sound appealing to those who are wish to find modern ideas in Buddhism, or to those who want to see the Buddha as the greatest precedent of 18th-century Enlightenment in Europe.

If someone reads the *Aggaññasutta* in its entirety, however, he or she will probably notice that there is nothing in there that reminds us of democracy. Some could say: “It’s a matter of interpretation”. It may be, but I really doubt we have much room for interpretation. Some scholars (e.g. R. Gombrich, S. Collins) consider this discourse as a satire of Brahmanical cosmologies, an example of the subtle irony of the Buddha, who was able to reverse moral values of the opponents using their own narrative strategies, symbols, myths, etc. If that is true,

Suu Kyi's interpretation would look even stranger. But I will grant that the Buddha is actually talking seriously.

The *Aggaññasutta* begins with two brahmins (Vāseṭṭha and Bharaddāja) visiting the Buddha. They have become Buddhist monks and are being scolded by brahmin relatives and acquaintances, who keep telling them that the brahmins are the best, the rest of the castes are degenerate, and it is not fitting for a brahmin to mix with outcasts. The Buddha then tells an ancient tale about the evolution of a universal era, from beings made of light to normal, flesh and bone humans fighting for possessions, food and territory (this "myth" is not exclusive of the *Aggaññasutta*, it is already referred to in the *Brahmajālasutta*, for instance). In order to prevent chaos, a great king is elected by the people, he is the *Mahāsammata* "the Great Elected", the original king, the one with the monopoly of violence, to put it in Weberian terms. A very conspicuous interpretation of the sutta can be found at its end of the discourse, when the Buddha says:

Vāseṭṭha, it was Brahmā Sanankumāra who spoke this verse:

The Khattiya's best among those who value clan;

He with knowledge and conduct is best of gods and men.

This verse was rightly sung, not wrongly, rightly spoken, not wrongly, connected with profit, not unconnected. I too say, Vāseṭṭha:

The Khattiya's best among those who value clan;

He with knowledge and conduct is best of gods and men.

The main question in the *Aggaññasutta* is to know which *varṇa* "caste" (?) is the best one. The solution is offered in the quoted passage: *kṣatriyas* (the army) are the most important *varṇa*, because they guarantee social peace and stability (this reminds us more of the Burmese military-junta discourse...).

Second conclusion of the sutta: Among religious (apolitical) people, the "knowledgeable" are the best (understand: even if they are not Brahmins). That is, I think, the whole point of the *Aggaññasutta*.

And if we move now to another important text, the *Mahāvamsa* (Book IV), the classic Buddhist chronicle of the Theravādins in South and Southeast Asia (i.e. the tradition Suu Kyi allegedly follows), we will see how, indeed, the legacy of the Mahāsammata was everything but democratic. It was, according to ancient Buddhists, a regular monarchy, a lineage of blood, not of merit. Even the Buddha Gotama himself was a descendant of this primaeval *kṣatriya* (“warrior”).

All that being said, we could ask wherefrom comes this fever of some leaders to demonstrate that Democracy is not contradictory with Buddhist political philosophy. Sometimes Democracy is used as a synonym of social justice, but the spirit of Democracy is lost in favour of more traditional ideas that tend to correspond with what I said in the beginning, namely that the favourite political structure for Buddhists has always been the Empire (a Dhamma Empire, of course). Let us only consider the silence of Suu Kyi regarding the massacres of the Rohingya muslims. Or, for instance, what a Burmese student leader, Min Ko Naing, said back in 1988, when during the protests against the Burmese dictatorship he was asked about the greatest obstacle to democracy:

As you know, Min Ko Naing can only conquer a bad king. If the ruler is good, we carry him on our sholders.

Hans Bernd Zöllner, a German scholar who has devoted an entire volume to the relationship between the military-junta and Suu Kyi, has synthesised the problem in this line:

“Democracy” was thus synonymous with everything other than the current government, which was not trusted.

Source: [Famous Classic Indian Books](#)